

MISTICA: Expanding the Internet's Capacity for Development



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[Photo: The FUNREDES website.]

A community that is part collaborative, part cooperative, part think tank, part utopian experiment — and all virtual. That's a rough — very rough — description of the [MISTICA](#) project. It may also be why Daniel Pimienta, Executive Director of the [Fundacion Redes y Desarrollo \(FUNREDES\)](#) and MISTICA's coordinator, admits that explaining the project poses challenges.

He agrees that MISTICA — an acronym for Methodology and Social Impact of Information and Communication Technologies in America — sounds like religion or magic. In fact, it's really about nurturing a human community enabled by digital communication, an attempt to expand the Internet's capabilities by widening its social rather than its electronic bandwidth.

The Samana Network

MISTICA is officially named the Samana Network, after the city in the Dominican Republic where its first meeting was organized. It attempts to integrate information and communication resources, overcome language barriers in real time, and allow people to attend meetings virtually.

The network is sponsored jointly by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and Fondation Charles Léopold Mayer pour le progrès de l'homme, a Swiss-based non-governmental organization (NGO). FUNREDES, the implementer, with help from other partners in the region, has promoted information and communication technologies (ICTs) for regional development in Latin America and the Caribbean since 1988.

Objectives

The two-year project has two main objectives. One is to use Internet technology to nurture a network of Latin American and Caribbean academics and social activists to help make them more effective. The other is to experiment with different ways of making this work, technically and socially. It's based on careful planning, structured yet open dialogue, and a commitment by members of the pilot community to work together.

As proposed, it seeks to "build synergies between different actors and organizations working with ICTs for social development in the region, which will directly address an identified priority in the region. The networking activity will allow a group of relevant participants to combine their experiences, promoting a more comprehensive understanding of the social impact and potential of ICTs to society, in particular from the perspective of civil society and community-based organizations."

Foundations

MISTICA builds on two other projects: 'Efficient Multilingual Management of Electronic Conferences' (EMEC), and 'Participation at a Distance' (PAD). EMEC supplies the translations, while PAD allows users to take part in both face-to-face and virtual conferences, from anywhere.

MISTICA also includes an electronic discussion list and an Internet clearinghouse — a website with a searchable database of information on the social impact of technology in the region. On the site, community members post messages in any one of four languages — French, Spanish, English, or Portuguese — which, through automated translation, can be read and understood in all of these languages. To reduce information overload, MISTICA staffers summarize postings to give users a quick overview, with links to the full documents. The machine translations aren't perfect, but they're fairly fast, allowing the near-immediate exchange of ideas. Pimienta hopes at some point to expand the site's capabilities to translate indigenous languages, too.

Test group

Pimienta says the 200-odd members of MISTICA are a test group, not just for the technology, but for the social structure it supports. All members have a say in the way discussions operate. He claims that this is the first time anyone has tried to organize respect for information on the Internet, and hopes that when the experimental phase finishes at the end of the year, the project will become permanent and self-sustaining.

"We consider that we are walking on the edge — democratic participation on the Internet is new. No decision is taken by a single person. Everything is discussed in collegiality. You have to be transparent to create a new culture of collaboration," he stresses.

Incremental design

Since the forum is an evolving laboratory, Pimienta says its members are unashamed to try things and fail, because they learn more from failure than from success. He calls this process 'incremental design'. "Incremental design is a very nice concept — very beautiful — but managing it is not a piece of cake."

Through it, however, MISTICA's participants have learned that the process must be socially involving and transparent to every user, that they must modify the process as they go, and that they must allow for the complexity of the social processes they're trying to nurture.

User survey

A small user survey posing qualitative questions about the MISTICA project generated responses ranging from the positive — "creative, ethical, and organized" — to the neutral — "transparent, democratic, and methodical." However, a small number of negative comments suggest there is some unhappiness with the project's complexity.

Most of the participants are from Argentina, Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and North America, with others from throughout South America and one user in Africa. About 65 % are male and 35 % female, matching the overall Internet use proportions.

Pimienta says one disappointment is that, despite the project's multilingual capability, most users are Spanish and few come from the English Caribbean. Moreover, MISTICA, which is designed as an ongoing forum for ideas, survives on constant member postings. So far, only about 30% of its members have posted messages. The forum receives, on average, about one or two contributions per day.

Social impact

Harder to measure than participation rates is the project's social influence. Pimienta notes that it's difficult to know whether or how the forum has changed anyone's thinking. But he has anecdotal evidence, such as a Paris-based university professor who used MISTICA to teach his daily classes. Since the professor had never contributed, Pimienta heard of him only by accident.

"A good virtual community is a community where people are collaborators. This is hard to evaluate because a lot of it is happening behind the scenes," he says.

Empowering communities

"Since the early 1990s, FUNREDES's position is that the Internet's [role in] development is not about plugging and playing, chatting and surfing, getting information abroad, converging to one language, one culture and one market," he concludes. "It's more about empowering persons and communities, collaborating and social networking, producing local content, facilitating diversity of languages, cultures, and opinions — communication above technology."

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